

THE IMAGE OF "BRAINWASHING"

BY ALBERT D. BIDERMAN

Many social scientists have harbored fear that the techniques of analyzing human behavior might fall into the hands of unscrupulous but powerful individuals and organizations who would thereupon mold people as they pleased and rob individuals of their independence and identity. Here is a review article that examines at length some of the studies that have been made of brainwashing and their apparent implications.

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A NUMBER of years ago, a television journalist asked me what the difference was between the research we social scientists did when working on a subject like "brainwashing" and what he and his fellow journalists did when "researching the story." This television producer had interviewed several former victims of "brainwashing," had read numerous books on the subject, had consulted a variety of experts, had scanned some "iron curtain" country documents, and after about six weeks of work, had a script he was ready to "shoot."

"I guess a major difference in this case," I told him, "is that we social scientists take one heck of a lot longer to cover the story."

In 1951, shortly after the Chinese Communists first sought to consolidate their victory in the "War of Liberation" by intensive and extensive programs of "thought reform," the journalist Edward Hunter published the book *Brainwashing in Red China*.¹ Since then the word "brainwashing" has become a fixture of our language.

In the decade since the appearance of Hunter's book, the public meanings of the term have been determined largely by writings of journalists and autobiographies of victims, rather than by the research of scholars and scientists. This is true whether "brainwashing" is used with specific reference to Chinese Communist practices and their results or as a more diffuse term of abuse to refer to any persuasive attempt one dislikes. Until recently, the only books by scientists and scholars on the subject reflected little if any firsthand research and relied heavily on journalists' accounts. Almost without exception, the writings in books by scientists have been anxious alarms about the threat to human values posed by "brainwashing," rather than undertakings with a truly scientific purpose.

¹ Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing in Red China*, New York, Vanguard, 1951.

SCHOLARLY WRITINGS

In 1961—ten years after Hunter entered the term “brainwashing” into Western parlance—the first scholarly books presenting original research on Chinese Communist “brainwashing” were published. The present review deals with two of these works. In the first, a psychiatrist, Robert J. Lifton,² presents eleven detailed interpretive case studies from his study of forty persons whom we would call “victims” and the Communists would call “beneficiaries” of “thought reform.” His cases include twenty-five Europeans and Americans who had been imprisoned in Red China and fifteen Chinese who came to Hong Kong after experiencing “thought reform.” Lifton proceeds from these cases to psychological, historical, cultural, political, and philosophical reflections on Chinese “thought reform,” in particular, and, more generally, on “the psychology of totalism,” on organized attempts at re-education and person change, and on the nature of the healthy ego.

The second book, by Edgar H. Schein, a social psychologist, with subordinate by-lines for Inge Schneier and Curtis H. Barker,³ also aims at a general treatment of “brainwashing.” On many important questions, its findings and interpretations are highly consistent with those presented by Lifton. Like Lifton, the authors review a great deal of the published and unpublished material on “brainwashing.” Schein and his associates also present their own model of “coercive persuasion.” It conceives of the process in terms of “unfreezing,” “changing,” and “refreezing” forces. In a more focused and catholic fashion than Lifton, they explore the various theoretical perspectives from which other writers have viewed the topic. The original research they report, however, is limited to a study of fifteen of the American civilians who returned after imprisonment in Red China. In orientation and style, the Schein book is also quite different from Lifton’s.

Both works under review devote considerable attention to the question of how various practices and institutions in the free world are like or unlike Chinese “thought reform.” Possibly, the nature and degree of these writers’ concern, as well as the nature of the answers they give to such questions, are affected by their own commitments to institutions oriented to producing personal change—Lifton to psychoanalytically oriented psychiatry, Schein to the National Training Laboratories program at Bethel, Maine.

² Robert J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China*, New York, Norton, 1961, 510 pp., \$6.95.

³ Edgar H. Schein with Inge Schneier and Curtis H. Barker, *Coercive Persuasion: A Socio-psychological Analysis of the “Brainwashing” of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists*, New York, Norton, 1961, 320 pp., \$6.75.

While the social scientists pondered their case histories of released prisoners, popular writings established an image of "brainwashing" as, in the words of Lifton, "an all-powerful, irresistible, unfathomable, and magical method of achieving total control over the human mind" (p. 4). As both Lifton and Schein concede, these almost ineradicable connotations make "brainwashing" a term that is far from precise and of questionable utility. Nonetheless, it has become so much a fixture of the vocabulary that the authors of both books have used it in their titles, albeit only in the subtitles and with the note of disdain that is conveyed by the quotation marks with which these authors fence the word off.

Not that informed scientists had published nothing on the subject of "brainwashing" until these books appeared; they had, but within scientific journals and papers at meetings that received only passing public attention. Indeed, a draft bibliography on "brainwashing" distributed in 1960 by the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology⁴ listed over a hundred scientific and scholarly reports on the subject, and the literature has continued to proliferate since. Particularly noteworthy were such works as the comprehensive (60-page) discussion and analysis of Soviet and Chinese Communist methods of interrogation and indoctrination published in 1956 by L. E. Hinkle and H. G. Wolff;⁵ some pointedly "debunking" articles by R. Bauer;⁶ the special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* edited by Schein and Bauer in 1957;⁷ and a number of journal articles by Schein⁸ and by Lifton.⁹

⁴ *Brainwashing: A Guide to the Literature*, Report from the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, Forest Hills, N.Y., 1960.

⁵ Lawrence E. Hinkle, Jr., and Harold G. Wolff, "Communist Interrogation and Indoctrination of 'Enemies of the State': Analysis of Methods Used by the Communist State Police (Special Report)," *A.M.A. Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 76, 1956, pp. 115-174.

⁶ Raymond A. Bauer, "N + 1 Ways Not to Run a Railroad," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 15, 1960, pp. 650-655; "Brainwashing: Psychology or Demonology?" *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 13, 1957, pp. 41-47.

⁷ Robert A. Bauer and Edgar H. Schein, Introduction to Special Issue on "Brainwashing," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 13, 1957, pp. 3-4.

⁸ Edgar H. Schein, "The Chinese Indoctrination Program for Prisoners of War: A Study of Attempted Brainwashing," *Psychiatry*, Vol. 19, 1956, pp. 149-172; "Some Observations on Chinese Methods of Handling Prisoners of War," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 20, 1956, pp. 321-327; "Brainwashing and Totalitarianism in Modern Society," *World Politics*, Vol. 11, 1959, pp. 430-442; "Interpersonal Communication, Group Solidarity, and Social Influence," *Sociometry*, Vol. 23, 1960, pp. 148-161.

⁹ Robert J. Lifton, "Home by Ship: Reaction Patterns of American Prisoners of War Repatriated from North Korea," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 110, 1954, pp. 732-739; "Thought Reform of Western Civilians in Chinese Communist Prisons," *Psychiatry*, Vol. 19, 1956, pp. 173-195; "Chinese Communist Thought Reform," *Group Processes, Transactions of the Third Conference*, New York, Josiah Macy, Jr., Foundation, 1956.

"BRAINWASHING" DEBUNKED

These and other writings had established a number of conclusions regarding "brainwashing"—or, more accurately, disestablished a number of erroneous conceptions that had gained currency. The scholarly writings affirmed the following:

1. No special or novel scientific "gimmick" for influencing behavior was involved in Chinese or Russian Communist practice. Hypnotism and drugs were not involved, nor were the double-whammy or Kickapoo Joy Juice.

2. The Communist practices of indoctrination, interrogation, and confession elicitation did not rest upon a deliberate application of a scientific theory of behavioral influence, Pavlovian or any other. Rather, they represented a blend of (a) traditional lore of interrogators, Communist proselytizers, and prosecutors, (b) common sense and not uncommon nonsense about the human personality, (c) Communist dogma, and (d) cultural conceptions of the person who offends authority in the traditions of Russia and China.

3. The practices of the Chinese Communists did not involve a new and unprecedented epitome of the arts of influence. Applications of coercion, persuasion, and radical changes of social environment have been used frequently in history to produce changes of belief and behavior as extreme and as ego-alien as those produced in recent times by Communist "brainwashers." Cries of "I am a wretched sinner but am beginning to see the light" have always been with us, along with self-abnegating and self-destructive confessions, opportunistic or delusory, to all manner of crimes and diabolic alliances.

THE TARDINESS AND INACCURACY OF THE SCHOLAR

The books under review reaffirm and further document these assertions (really, counterassertions). This is no small contribution to knowledge, since in our society certain kinds of knowledge are not, in a sense, known until they have been published in a hard binding. The authority of cloth covers has long been overdue for reasonable and intelligent examinations of "brainwashing." Much mischief has been caused by the delay.

The books under review and the studies on which they are based aspire to considerably more than the debunking of the "brainwashing" mythology, however. These larger purposes have been considered in a number of reviews of these books that have already been published. Here, I wish to consider these books in relation to changing conceptions of "brainwashing" on the part of scholar and public. First, it is useful to consider some possible reasons for the lag that has existed

in informed, objective reportage and interpretation relative to the misinformed and the sensationalist.

The very nature of the broad aspirations of these books, I believe, indicates one reason for the delay. Neither of the authors—nor any other social scientist, apparently—felt it to be his role to publish for the sake of public consumption alone a detailed, factual, and thorough description of "brainwashing," to answer the fundamental questions the public was asking: "Can 'brainwashing' force a man to surrender any belief or loyalty he may have? Can the 'brainwasher' make his victim believe in any absurdity? Can he force the victim to carry out any act, however atrocious? If not, how often, with whom, and in what respects has 'brainwashing' been variously successful or unsuccessful?"

Social scientists, it seems, must have even grander purposes than these—such as considering the relevance of what they study to social science theory and to broad philosophical questions and ultimate social issues. Such activities are both more leisurely and more time-demanding pursuits than social reportage on burning questions of the day.

From a scientific standpoint, the concentration of effort on work that tries to conform to the ideal of a rigorous generalizing science may be strategic. From a social point of view, however, a gap is being created between the area occupied by the journalist and the domain of the social scientist. It is being created because persons who are trained in the use of powerful tools for collecting and summarizing social facts are being drawn almost exclusively into activities addressed primarily to the higher generalizations and abstract, theoretically rooted constructs.

The problem is aggravated in situations where the credentials of the social scientist give him special *entré* to the sources of data, or, indeed, a near monopoly position with respect to the facts. This was true to an unusual extent in the case of information about "brainwashing." Unlike many matters with which social scientists deal, "brainwashing" was not an issue regarding which every journalist, much less everyman, felt he was his own expert. Rather, it was generally defined as a mystery that could be understood only by psychiatrists, psychologists, and others privy to the occult mysteries of the psyche, as well as of the Kremlin. A special factor also operated in that the first extensive opportunity for study of Americans surviving the experience was the release of prisoners of war at the close of the Korean conflict. In the military establishment there is greater legitimation and utilization of the specialized and systematic study than in most other institutional areas. Both Lifton and Schein began their work with studies of the military prisoners.

It is noteworthy that despite the vast interest of both social scientists

and the general public in the encounter of American prisoners of war and Communist indoctrinators, almost a decade passed before a single book on this subject was published by a scientist who participated in the several official studies.¹⁰

Furthermore, not only the general public was misinformed about "brainwashing." Social scientists, too, relied on bad information and incorrect interpretations. Some of them wove into theoretical works and textbooks material that is clearly erroneous in the light of knowledge presented by writers such as Schein and Lifton. They contributed to public confusion, anxiety, and mystification about "brainwashing" by making ill-informed pronouncements on the subject. A great deal of pseudo-scientific speculation was authoritatively disseminated, variously claiming that "brainwashing" was "really" conditioning à la Pavlov's dogs or was accomplished by using drugs, hypnotism, or the sensory deprivation effect.

PUBLIC CONCERN WITH "BRAINWASHING"

Both Lifton and Schein trace the development of recent Chinese Communist "thought-reform practices" to the Yen-an period of the Chinese Communist Party (1935-1944). In the indoctrination of captured Kuomintang and Japanese soldiers in the 1930's and 1940's and in the *Hsueh Hsi* and *Cheng Feng* movements of the "pre-Liberation" period, almost all the paraphernalia of "thought reform" was already in existence. What was yet to come was the candidacy of the entire population of China, including resident foreigners, for "thought reform."

It was not until the 1950's, however, that the broad public in the West became exercised about "brainwashing." Many articles and a few books on the vast success of Chinese Communist proselytizing were available to Western readers. But there was nothing alarming to Westerners in Japanese soldiers' being dissuaded from continuing the "rape of China," or in the soldiers of the "corrupt Nationalists" or "war lords" joining the virile forces of revolution and agrarian reform. Further, for most Americans the Oriental was a strange fellow anyway, and reports of the most bizarre behavior on his part occasioned more amusement than surprise.

Two things changed all this for the ordinary American. The first

¹⁰ I am among my own targets here. I have a book on the POW episode in press, but its purpose is more to offset the misinformation and misinterpretations that grew in the vacuum left by inadequate research reporting on the part of social scientists than to attempt a definitive presentation of the knowledge developed by these studies. See *March to Calumny: The Story of American POW's in the Korean War*, New York, Macmillan, 1963 (in press).

radical change was in the attitudes engendered by the Cold War. With the advent of the Cold War, embracing and serving Communism was seen as diabolism and not just as joining an ally, as it had been during World War II, or even as radical, misguided, or faddish "idealism." The second radical change was American involvement with the Chinese Communists in the Korean War. When Americans, including businessmen, clergymen, and—that very symbol of the boy next door—the American serviceman, showed signs of having been "brainwashed," practices of the Chinese Communists were no longer dismissable as a distant phenomenon that happened only to people of the "mysterious East."

These two elements—the diabolical view of Communism and the racist basis of reactions—had much to do with shaping the mysterious connotations in public concepts of "brainwashing." The former element—attitudes toward Communism—seems to have been considerably more important than the latter. Slightly earlier involvements of Americans, notably Robert Vogeler and William Oatis, in Eastern European "show trials," along with the case of Cardinal Mindszenty, had aroused considerable reaction.

EAST EUROPEAN PRECURSORS

Very similar attitudes and emotions among intellectuals, particularly leftist intellectuals, had a much longer history. The Western intellectual's response to news about "brainwashing" was preconditioned by his earlier exposure to the wildly self-abnegating "confessions" of Bolshevik leaders in Soviet purge trials. Probably no other feature of Soviet communism contributed more to the alienation of Western intellectuals than the confession-extortion practices of Soviet purges.¹¹ For the sophisticated follower of current events, there was probably considerable continuity in exposure to events in European Communist countries and those involving Red China. The Soviet purges of the 1930's, the enlistment of German POW's for Soviet propaganda, the East European "show trials" involving both Communist and anti-Communist notables, the "germ warfare" trials of Japanese military prisoners, followed in fairly short order by the "germ warfare" confessions of Americans captured during the Korean War and the "espionage" confessions by Western civilians who were imprisoned by the Chinese Communists at about the same time—all were considered of a piece with what during the 1950's came to be called "brainwashing."

During the earliest period of concern about "brainwashing," the practices of the Chinese Communists were generally discussed as Eastern

¹¹ Richard Crossman, editor, *The God That Failed*, New York, Harper, 1949.

manifestations of the Bolshevik model. Until recently the most widely read interpretations of Chinese Communist "brainwashing" were those of Hunter¹² and Meerloo.¹³ Both these writers talked about "brainwashing" as an application of Pavlovian techniques. Hunter, in fact, reported "brainwashing" to rest fundamentally on a specific technique for controlling the mind invented by Pavlov at the behest of the Kremlin. In popular writing, conceptions of the Chinese practices were nourished by images drawn from European totalitarianism by Koestler, Huxley, Orwell, and Meerloo.

In contrast, Lifton and Schein regard "brainwashing" in Communist China as bearing only some relationship to the Russian and East European precursors in history, method, and objectives. In all three respects, they regard "thought reform" in Communist China as a distinctive Chinese Communist institution—heavily influenced by both the contemporary politics and the traditional culture of China.

Two interesting points should be noted. First of all, regardless of the degree of similarity or difference between Chinese Communist and Russian practices, the same fundamental concerns regarding "control of the mind" motivate Schein and Lifton as motivated earlier authors in discussions of practices in Russian purges and "show trials." The nature of these concerns has much to do with determining the kinds of theoretical questions that have been put to the available data regarding the experiences of those who have been subjected to either the Chinese or Russian varieties of what we now call "brainwashing."¹⁴

The second point to be noted here is a disparity between current explanatory theories and those more in vogue when Soviet purge trials were at the center of attention. In these earlier writings, the focus was on *Communist* victims of Communism. The answer to the seeming riddle of the victims' behavior was first sought in principles peculiar to the way in which Communists behaved—the state of mind of the convinced Bolshevik. His self-damning "confession" was interpreted

¹² Edward Hunter, *op.cit.*; and *Brainwashing: The Story of Men Who Defied It*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1956.

¹³ Joost A. M. Meerloo, "The Crime of Menticide," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 107, 1951, pp. 594-598; "Pavlovian Strategy as a Weapon of Menticide," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 110, 1954, pp. 809-813; *The Rape of the Mind: The Psychology of Thought Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing*, Cleveland, World Publishing Company, 1956.

¹⁴ One exception to this is a heightened concern with factors determining the degree of resistance an individual would show to attempted "brainwashing," which arose out of the Korean War experience. While there had been a modicum of attention to this in earlier writing, the tendency had been to regard all who had been subjected to "brainwashing" as innocent victims of a completely overwhelming and irresistible force. The orientation arising from military involvement with the problem during the Korean War led to research that gave high prominence to the question of who would collaborate and who would resist.

as a final last service to the Party. As late as 1954, a detailed analysis of the behavior of victims of the Moscow trials used the distinctive psychology of the convinced Bolshevik as the primary explanatory motive for "confessions." The authors of this analysis, Leites and Bernaut, dismissed "confessions" of non-Communists in apparently similar trials as completely noncomparable psychologically.¹⁵

BOLSHEVIKS AND PEOPLE

Considering what we now know about Chinese Communist practices, what remains of the thesis previously accepted by Leites and Bernaut, and by other writers such as Koestler,¹⁶ Beck and Godin,¹⁷ and Walter Krivitsky?¹⁸ It is possible that these authors completely misread the motives (if this is a good word) of the Communist "confessors" and that actually the same dynamics were operating with them as with the non-Communists who are the subjects of Schein's and Lifton's studies. Or service to the Party may have been a rationalization that had a role in the dynamics underlying the behavior of the Communist victims analogous to other rationalizations that allowed the non-Communists to explain their ego-alien behavior to themselves. A third possibility is that the non-Communists were first brought by "brainwashing" to become Communists, and only then was it possible for their captors to gain from them the same kinds of self-damaging and self-abnegating "confessions" as were gained in the "show trials" from persons who had been convinced Communists previously.

In addition to begging some of the major questions about the "brainwashing" process, this last explanation is not consistent with what we know of the procedures that have been followed in the Chinese cases. It is worth mentioning because the original "service-to-the-party" theory had much to do with shaping later conceptions. I believe it was the prevalence of this theory that led to widespread acceptance of the proposition that the initial step in the "brainwashing" sequence was ideological conversion and that concrete acts of service to the Communists, such as writing or accepting authorship of propaganda confessions, took place only when a motivational base of ideological conviction had been established. At least in the cases discussed in the books under review, "confession" and other concrete services such as informing were tools in the process of indoctrination and "reform,"

¹⁵ Nathan Leites and Elsa Bernaut, *Ritual of Liquidation*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1954, p. 20.

¹⁶ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, New York, Macmillan, 1941.

¹⁷ F. Beck and W. Godin (pseud.), *Russian Purge and Extraction of Confessions*, New York, Viking, 1951.

¹⁸ Walter Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, New York, Harper, 1939.

rather than indoctrination's being a tool for securing concrete collaborative acts.

We can also note that the explanations by Western writers changed from a concern with how strange people responded to a strange technique, when Soviet purges were considered; to how not-so-strange people responded to a strange technique, in the case of the "brainwashing" of Western civilians; and, finally, to how not-so-strange people responded to not-so-strange techniques. Again, the involvement of "ordinary Americans" with Chinese indoctrination methods in the Korean War had much to do with bringing about this change of orientation on the part of those studying the problem. From the standpoint of the social sciences, finding out that something originally regarded as strange is not so strange, after all, is a step forward. This is true even though the individuals studied by Schein and Lifton are hardly typical people. Indeed, the ordinary American would regard most of them as very strange birds before as well as after their "brainwashing."

DRAMA, MAGIC, AND SCIENCE

At the hands of the social scientists, much of the dramatic in the conception of techniques of brainwashing has also been diluted. This is true even in the work of Lifton, whose thinking is rooted in the dramatic concepts of psychoanalysis and who strives for literary and dramatic flair in his writing. In this respect, the contrast between the Schein and Lifton books in their treatment of "brainwashing" poses an interesting issue for the social sciences. Schein's aim is to relate the behavior of the "brainwashed" and the "brainwashers" to dry, commonly used, theoretical principles of behavioral science. Lifton seeks to capture the full drama that the experiences in prisons had for the victims and the full significance of "thought reform" for political and philosophical values. Interest in the topic of "brainwashing" quite clearly arises from the high significance it has for a number of human concerns—for central points of political conflict, for philosophical values, for the fundamental human concern with autonomy and dependency, for the dramatic quality of the contest of wills that takes place, and so on. But should these dramatic and value implications of events determine their significance for social science study? Should the concepts appropriate to dramaturgy, politics, and value philosophy determine the conceptual analysis we make of events for behavioral science purposes? Does the fact that an event is of great dramatic significance from the standpoint of our value orientation make it an important topic of study for the advancement of scientific knowledge? Because a particular aspect of an event was experienced with great

intensity by a person, does this necessarily make that aspect of the event a key factor in determining his over-all behavior? Because of its particular value significance and its dramatic character, the "brainwashing" topic affords an unusual opportunity for clarifying these questions and their answers for the social scientist.

The scientific view of events is essentially a disenchanted view. It strips events of much of their human significance—the elements of terror, mystery, disgust, delight, etc.—and leaves them, at most, merely interesting.

From the standpoint of the task of producing generalized knowledge, this disenchanted view is essential. Even to understand the emotional significance and the rational importance of events for the participants, the scientist, unlike the humanist, must seek detachment, rather than involvement. For many scientific purposes, the human significance of events is put aside almost entirely, as when thousands and thousands of personal tragedies become reduced to a "p" in a mortality table, and thousands of epitomes of personal ecstasy become merely an "N" of "outlets" in a Kinsey table.

In dealing with what Pearson called "questions of the day and of the fray," however, the scientist may obscure issues, rather than clarify them, if he remains insensitive to the value significance of alternatives to the participants. On the other hand, immersion in the questions of a particular day and a particular fray can lead to a confusion of the critical elements in some particular historical encounter with those that are critical to a general theory of human behavior.

In addition, as I have pointed out elsewhere, there have been two reciprocal fallacies involving what can be characterized as magical uses of science in discussions of "brainwashing." Some writers have made the techniques of interrogators appear magical by attaching technical labels to traditional practices. On the other hand, writers who try to be "hard-headed" and scientific by substituting impassive scientific names for ordinary expressive language may eliminate not only the extravagant judgments they object to but also almost all the human significance of "brainwashing." Thus "'treachery' can become mere 'attitude change' or 'a shift in the subject's frame of reference.'" ¹⁹

THE EXAGGERATIONS IMPLICIT IN "BRAINWASHING" CONCEPTIONS

These various types of error, I believe, have confounded the treatment of "brainwashing" by scientists. The major error, however, has been

¹⁹ Albert D. Biderman and Herbert Zimmer, editors, *The Manipulation of Human Behavior*, New York, Wiley, 1961, p. 6.

an exaggerated view of the scientific significance of "brainwashing," reflecting the intensity of the political and psychological involvements of the moment. It is also significant that the questions raised by scientists about "brainwashing" are essentially the same as those that have intrigued the press and the public, although they are translated into terms beyond the public's ken. While there have been exceptions, and Schein's book is a major one, the tendency of writers on the subject has been more to explain an uncritically accepted notion of what takes places in "brainwashing" in terms of some general, behavioral theory than to examine critically the many sources of data regarding what has transpired in prisons and "reform" institutions, and to determine from them what, if anything, we can learn about human behavior.

Both Lifton and Schein are aware of the danger of confounding their role as scientists with their role as persons responsive to the emotional and political significance of "brainwashing." In rationally evaluating their stance toward the topic, they both address themselves explicitly to these questions. Thus, Lifton writes:

. . . who during this era can pretend to be uninvolved in the issues of psychological coercion, of identity, and of ideology? Certainly not one who has felt impelled to study them at such length.

Instead, I have attempted to be both reasonably dispassionate and responsibly committed: dispassionate in my efforts to stand away from the material far enough to probe the nature of the process, its effects upon people exposed to it, and some of the influences affecting its practitioners; committed to my own analyses and judgments within the limitations and the bias of my knowledge (pp. vii-viii).

Schein straddles the same fence, but he leans his weight much more heavily in the direction of theoretical interests. After several paragraphs attacking extreme views of the "brainwashing" process and asserting that the phenomena are completely understandable in terms of theories of persuasion, he writes:

We are not concerned with providing a detailed description of the experiences of the prisoners, nor are we concerned with the political implications of the whole thought reform movement. . . . Rather . . . our main purpose is to contribute to the social psychology of influence and attitude change. This is not to say that we shall ignore the fact that the events of coercive persuasion . . . have obvious political relevance. Nor is it irrelevant to consider some of the implications of these events for a totalitarian society (p. 19).

While both books, Schein's in particular, find well-established principles applicable to the analysis of the behavioral changes that took place in "thought reform," they are both affected by the prevalent assumption that these changes were on scales incomparable with changes frequently observed. The theoretical orientations and the research procedures of

both authors fail to offset sufficiently preconceptions of the degree to which the behavior of those subjected to "brainwashing" was bizarre, extreme, ego-alien, and self-destructive.

HOW MANY WERE AFFECTED HOW MUCH?

To what extent can one extrapolate from the changes observed in the particular subjects studied to the changes that occurred among all who were subjected to the process or that would occur among others who might be subjected to it?

Neither author set out to study a representative group. Schein selected as subjects from among the returned Americans those who had experienced the "full force" of "thought reform" and built his analysis around a small number who showed particularly "extensive and lasting belief, attitude, and value change" (p. 20). While he is diligent in giving the reader qualifications and caveats against deriving erroneous impressions from this emphasis, his interest nonetheless is more in explaining change than in explaining resistance to it—in what happened where the treatment "took" than in what happened where it did not.

In Lifton's selection of cases, the European and Chinese subjects must be differentiated. For the Europeans, he presumably tried to contact all who were released ("deported") during the period of his stay in Hong Kong in 1954-1955. He gives us no discussion of how representative the Europeans were who exited during this period—at the close of the Korean War and at the time of the Geneva accord of Western powers and the Chinese Communists—as compared with those released earlier or later. Nor are we sure that his selection was not affected by differentials among those released in willingness to be his subjects, length of stay in Hong Kong, or other factors.

Similarly, Lifton's selection of Chinese subjects leaves us with many questions regarding the extent to which we can extrapolate from them to other Chinese exposed to "thought reform." They were generally young people, largely students, who happened to be available as subjects to the author through their association with refugee publishing organizations in Hong Kong. In a sense, they were all failures of "thought reform" in that they all reacted so unfavorably to the regime that they left the country; on the other hand, they were not such great failures as to be prevented from leaving the country or to be thrown into "reform prisons," where they might have been among the Chinese cellmates of Lifton's European subjects. Further, most of them had been more or less voluntary candidates for re-education at universities or revolutionary colleges.

Given the factors in the selection of subjects by these researchers, did they convey a picture biased in the direction of acquiescence and change? One cannot be sure, but I suspect this was the case, even with respect to Lifton's Chinese subjects.

One thing is certain, however: virtually all the subjects for these studies were people for whom the issues of "thought reform" meant a great deal—intellectual, politicized, philosophically minded people, deeply concerned about the meanings of their lives and callings.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEHAVIORAL INFLUENCE

"Brainwashing" has also been evaluated in terms of various conceptions of the intensity of the changes in attitude and belief that take place. One of the normative dimensions commonly applied is how "ego-alien"—or, in more psychoanalytic terms, "ego-dystonic"—the values or beliefs accepted during the process were to the person at the beginning of the process. This is frequently linked to a conception of cognitive distortion. The popular political conception, particularly evident in discussions of the behavior of military prisoners, is that Communist doctrine per se is ego-alien, that it is fundamentally alien to human nature and social reality. The acceptance of Communist beliefs is consequently regarded as *ipso facto* evidence of insanity or a warped, evil personality, or both.

Schein is particularly explicit in rejecting such assumptions:

. . . the assumption that the captor-induced beliefs are completely in conflict with the prisoner's, may be applicable to a few cases but certainly is not an accurate description of the situation of those cases who were influenced by the process . . . ; those cases in which influence resulted from a gradual shifting of the cognitive frame of reference, the adoption of new standards of evaluation, and the discovery of new perceptions of self and others (none of which were necessarily in fundamental conflict with the person's own value system) (p. 202).

In examining the false logic and cognitive distortion that were necessary for the attitude change that took place in those cases in which the prisoner adopted the political frame of reference of his (apparently) Communist-minded cellmates and interrogators, Schein writes:

The prisoner . . . finds in the logic of his models a series of cognitive steps which are reasonable and plausible. . . . We believe that they are as logical as any set of reasons ever are for holding certain attitudes, which means that they probably would not stand up under detailed formal analysis but that they are entirely plausible given the premises and experiences of the person who holds them. Thus, if one is influenced through the process of identification, that is, through the process of adopting new attitudes by seeing the world through one's model's eyes, one accepts the "psycho-logic" of the model and treats it as entirely rational. . . . There is always a certain amount of

distortion, sharpening, leveling and false logic in the beliefs and attitudes which other people acquire. . . . Coercive persuasion involves no more or less of such distortion than other kinds of influence, but our popular image of "brainwashing" suggests that somehow the process consists of extensive self-delusion and excessive distortion. We feel that this image is a false one; it is based on our lack of familiarity with knowledge about the process and the fact that so much publicity was given to the political influence which resulted in a few cases (pp. 238-239).

To offset mistaken conceptions of the uniqueness of Chinese Communist "brainwashing," the scholarly discussions have pointed to numerous historical parallels. The elicitation of false confessions, they show, had close parallels in Czarist Russian secret police practice and in "treason confessions" in Elizabethan England, and are alluded to most frequently in the Inquisition of the Middle Ages. The dramatic conversions of many religious movements are readily apparent models for the occurrence of enthusiastic, radical changes of personal beliefs.

Greater perspective might be gained, however, by evaluating the changes that have taken place through the influence of "thought reform" in comparison with changes that are considerably more commonplace than these historical dramas. Such comparisons, I feel, would clarify the extent to which the specific content of personal attitude and belief systems is rooted in a specific sociological context, as well as in a particular identity or ego. We might think, for example, of how inconceivable to the ordinary American of the 1930's would have been the thought that in a decade he would find satisfaction in the instant obliteration of the entire population of a city. We can consider the "identity change" required of a construction worker each working day as he goes from the four-letter-word, all-male culture of the job to the "polite," female-dominated, child-rearing culture of his suburban cul-de-sac. One can think of the vast shifts of behavior and attitude required of the thousands of men who move each day from the world of tribe and clan to the multiplying megalopolises of the world. Sociologists have characterized many institutions in which attitude change is expected in the course of adult socialization—for example, the changing attitudes of the medical student, as described recently by Becker and Geer,²⁰ or the socialization of the "fish" to the prison community, as described a number of years ago by Clemmer.²¹

Specific political attitudes, too, are as much properties of the person in his social situation as they are of the personality. A recent case is the political attitudes prevailing among lower-class European North

²⁰ Howard S. Becker and Blanche Geer, "The Fate of Idealism in Medical School," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 23, 1958, pp. 50-56.

²¹ Donald Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, New York, Christopher, 1940.

Africans, which, from the 1930's to the present, are reputed to have shifted from pro-Communist to Vichyite to pro-Communist to the neofascism of the OAS.

As for changes in extreme situations, few acts occurring after weeks or years of forced adaptation to an oppressive milieu in the Chinese reform prisons approach in degree the kind of radical deviation from norms previously held sacred that occurred in the space of a few hours among certain Nazi concentration camp inmates—for example, the Jewish doctor Nyiszli who was enlisted immediately in the *Sonderkommando* to help in the murder of his fellows.²²

Looking at changes of attitude and belief that occur in the course of situational change makes such changes as were produced by the hot-house microclimates of Communist reform prisons less impressive.

The commotion has been occasioned by the “unthinkable” thoughts some “brainwashing” victims enunciated with apparent belief. Much of what these books show us about the behavior of these victims is that their behavior was unthinkable only to people who had never stopped to think carefully and objectively about it.

RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Perspective on “brainwashing,” however, also requires more explicit identification of those aspects of personality that are normally most resistant to change—as well as those that are most changeable. While in its assumption that the behavior of the victims of “thought reform” was quite beyond the kinds of change that we observe frequently, the “brainwashing” literature exaggerates implicitly our conception of what is normal stability, in other respects it may convey to us an exaggerated idea of the changeability of the person in the abnormally stressful situation. Its preoccupation with the way in which the behavior of victims was changed and with the cases who showed the most dramatic signs of influence contributes to this. Both books tell us more about the resistance and resilience of the beliefs and personalities of victims than we have generally heard before; but, as I have indicated, they do not tell us enough.

A more serious exaggeration, I believe, stems from the tendency to take too literally the statements of the perpetrators and the victims of “thought reform” about its being a process for the creation of “a new person.” I fear that concepts conveying meanings about the nature of the person are being applied that are far more profound than the processes and the behavior merit. The connotations of words like

²² Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett Publications, 1961.

"identity," "self," "autonomy," and forms of the verb "to be"—terms that are particularly central to Lifton's discussion—have many behavioral and metaphysical connotations that may lead to a more dramatic conception of what takes place than the facts merit. Thus, the word used in these books about what was being changed is "self," but the connotations often are more appropriate to the word "soul."

The Chinese Communists used extreme means to make their victims believe that the most profound aspects of their being were at stake in the ordeal. The victim had to take seriously the Communists' dogma about himself and their definitions about what was going on.

This plight of the victims of "thought reform" has quite properly contributed to the intensity of our feelings of outrage and sympathy. Much of the degradation they suffered derives from their having been made to treat inanities about self and society as if they were profound truths. The proper alarm about "brainwashing" comes from the spectacle of a vast society under the control of persons with such bizarre views of the nature of man and compulsive pretensions of rectitude that they are led to coerce reality to accord with their narrow images.

Sympathy, outrage, and alarm, however, should not lead us to overdignify this rascality by attributing to it more rationality, effectiveness, and profundity than it actually has.

Both these books perform a service by recognizing that the psychology of the victims cannot be understood without an understanding of the psychology (and sociology) of the perpetrators. Both works offer considerable illumination into the wellsprings of what Lifton calls "the psychology of totalitarianism." Their inquiry into the compulsive application of coercion to achieve conformity with a narrow ideological view of man also leads them to valuable perspectives on our own institutions for "person change."

LESSONS OF "BRAINWASHING"

For a person interested in that complex of topics to which this journal is devoted, one facet of "brainwashing" still awaits systematic study—the intense reactions among Western publics to the "brainwashing" story. As we have indicated, it was a reaction that, to an unusual extent, was shaped by social scientists, although far too little and somewhat late by social science. It was a reaction that brought into play fundamental conceptions of the nature of man on the part of both scholars and the man in the street.

Detached analyses of fallacies in the conceptions that victims, perpetrators, and the Western public held about beliefs and the personality may point to corresponding ones in the thinking of the social scientist.